

# CALEB'S COLORS

NEAL SHUSTERMAN

A dark hat. A dark coat. A tall figure standing in the doorway, silhouetted by the stark streetlight.

"My name is Quentin Prax. I'm here about your son."

I didn't like him. Not at first. The way he spoke, it was so slow, so practiced and smooth. The way he said his name—hissing it like a snake. *Praxsssssss*.

"We've been expecting you," said my father.

The man stepped into the light of the living room, where I could see that his dark coat was not black but brown. Not just brown though—it was woven of many different colors, all intertwined until they blended perfectly into a rich mahogany. His eyes locked on mine, and he smiled. I had to look away. His smile was unnerving.<sup>1</sup> It could not be read. Like his coat, it seemed to be woven of so many different thoughts and meanings that I didn't know what that smile was for.

"You must be the sister," he said to me through that smile.

I didn't like being called "the sister." "My name's Rhia," I told him. He smiled again.

"Rhia. What a colorful name."

He strolled across our living room as if he were welcome, and my parents didn't do anything about it. His presence was so powerful, my parents had no response.

Prax turned to Caleb, my little brother. Caleb sat at the kitchen table, the place he could most often be found, with a box of Crayolas. His left hand moved across a piece of paper, leaving periwinkle streaks.

1 **unnerving**: aggravating; upsetting

When you first watch Caleb and his Crayolas, you might think his marks are random—just wild firings from a ruined brain—but watch long enough, and you'll see shapes forming out of those wild lines, until you suddenly realize that you're looking at a sailing ship, or a mountain range, or a lion that seems so real you'd swear it might leap off the page at you.

And Caleb does all this without even looking at the page. He'll just sit there, staring forward, rocking back and forth, in a way that could make you seasick just watching him.

"This must be Caleb," said Mr. Prax. "How are you, Caleb?"

"He won't answer you," I told the man. "He doesn't talk."

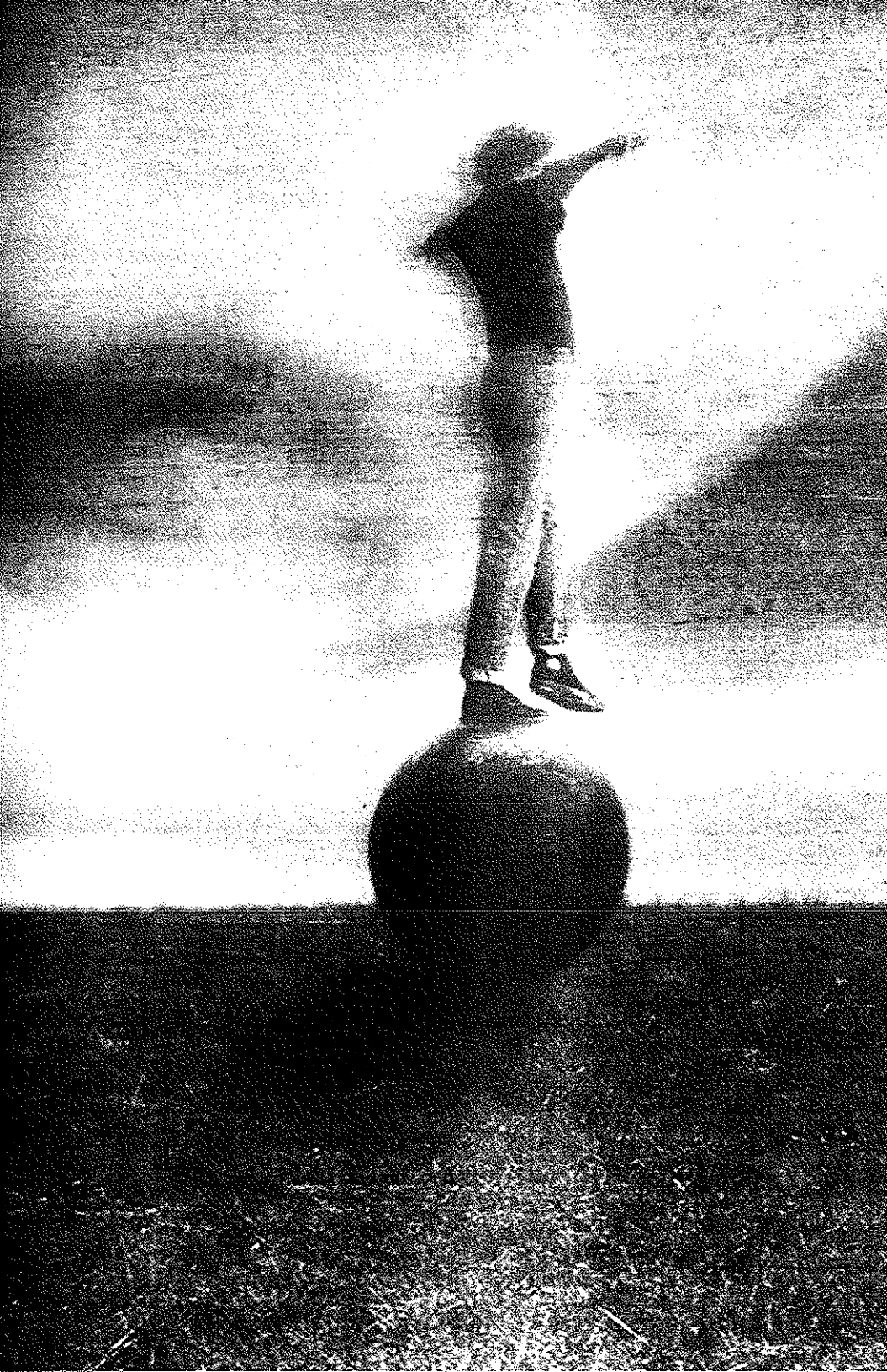
But Mr. Prax only smiled that many-colored smile once more and said, "Oh, he does. He just doesn't care to use words." I tried to stare this Mr. Prax down, but I couldn't. People who came to help Caleb promised us the moon, then they took our money and left Caleb no better than they found him. Caleb's condition gave my parents enough to fight about without having to argue over quack doctors—which is exactly what I figured Prax was. He smiled at me again, then he turned to my parents. "May we talk in private?"

"Rhia," said my mother, "why don't you take Caleb upstairs and get him ready for bed."

I was irritated that I couldn't be a part of whatever was going on, but also relieved that I could be out of Mr. Prax's sight. I didn't trust him. He seemed far too calculating and mysterious. I didn't like mysteries—especially when they were strutting around my house.

I took Caleb's hand and lifted him to his feet. He followed me upstairs quietly tonight. Sometimes it's not so easy. Sometimes he would whine and pull his hair. Sometimes he would scream like the end of the world had come. I had grown used to all of that—I had had to, because putting him to bed was a responsibility I had chosen to take on. But tonight he didn't kick and scream; he merely followed.

I took him to his room and dressed him for bed. All the time he stared forward with that blank, nonseeing look of his. He could stare for hours at the TV like that, and I always wondered what he saw there. Light and colors? Shapes moving back and forth? There were times when he would take a crayon to paper and recreate, line for line, the image of something he had seen on TV, as if his mind was a VCR, recording everything it saw. Then there would be the times he would draw things too strange and exotic to have come from anywhere in this world. In one moment he



would draw a place of terror so dark I could not bear to look at it, and then in the next instant turn the page over and draw a world of such intense beauty it would make me truly know that there was a God somewhere, because who else could put such a beautiful image into the head of a small, autistic<sup>2</sup> boy?

That was life with Caleb. A never-ending gallery of Crayola wonders that papered the wall of his room, floor to ceiling. Me, I could barely draw a stick figure . . . but it didn't make me jealous. How could I be jealous of a brother whose whole world had no room for anything but himself and his Crayolas?

I finished dressing Caleb for bed and left him. Sneaking out onto the stairs, I peeked down into the kitchen, where Mr. Prax sat with my parents.

"I've done much work with idiot savants," said Mr. Prax. I bristled at the expression "idiot savant." That's the label the world gives people like Caleb. People whose brain somehow got wired to do one thing and one thing only. There were people who could do instant math like a supercomputer but had to be taught to feed themselves. There were some who could memorize hundreds of books just by skimming through them but couldn't hold a conversation. I'd even heard of a little girl labeled as severely retarded who designed an aircraft for the military.

Dad sat with his arms crossed. Mom had called Prax on the advice of a friend, but it had been a long time since Dad trusted therapists.

"Caleb's had every therapy in the book," said Dad. "I doubt yours will help any more than the others did."

"You don't understand," said Mr. Quentin Prax sharply. "I'm not here as a therapist, I'm here as an employer. I'm the owner of a small but prestigious art gallery specializing in unique works of art. Perhaps you've heard of it: the Galleria du Mondes."<sup>3</sup>

My parents seemed as surprised as I was. If he wasn't a doctor, then what did he want with Caleb?

"We don't know of it," admitted my mother. "We're not really art patrons . . ."

"My gallery seeks out . . . special artists with unique talents," Prax told them. "A colleague<sup>4</sup> of mine came across one of Caleb's sketches and sent it to me. I was quite impressed."

2 **autistic**: one with autism, a mental disorder characterized by repetitive behavior, language problems, and the inability to interact with others

3 **Galleria du Mondes**: Gallery of the Worlds

4 **colleague**: coworker; a person who works in the same profession

Mom stiffened in her chair. Until now she had watched Prax with wide and hopeful eyes. But now it seemed her hope was draining fast.

"Just what is it you want, Mr. Prax?" she said coldly.

Prax grinned at her. "Simple," he said. "I would like to commission a large work from him."

Mom laughed, and Dad, well, he just got angry.

"Listen," said my father. "We've got a little boy with a lot of problems. I don't like the idea of hiring him out as some sort of creative freak for the amusement of a bunch of snobs."

Mr. Prax looked down at his perfectly manicured fingernails, unconcerned with my father's anger. "You misunderstand," he said. "The sole purpose of my gallery is to give expression to creativity that would otherwise be lost. Your son has a gift, and I'd like to help him share it with the world." Mr. Prax paused for a moment, then took a deep breath and said, "I have a special interest, you see, because my own daughter was very much like your boy."

"Was?" questioned Mom.

"She's no longer with me."

"I'm sorry," said Mom.

My father sighed, on the verge of giving in. "How much will this cost?" he asked.

Mr. Prax laughed heartily at that—loud enough that it made me jump. "It won't cost you, my friend, it will only cost me," he said. Then he pulled an envelope out of his pocket and handed it to my father, who opened it and began laughing. There was a check in the envelope.

"All right, who put you up to this?" he chuckled. "Was it Joe at work? He's always pulling practical jokes."

"No joke," said Prax, completely serious. "And that's only half. The other half is payable on completion of the work."

My mother was gasping as if she were hyperventilating.<sup>5</sup>

"A million dollars? For a drawing by Caleb?"

"My gallery has some very wealthy patrons."

I could hardly believe it myself. I thought of the way Mom and Dad always bought those stupid lottery tickets, even though a person's more likely to get struck by lightning five times than to win once—and now the jackpot comes walking right into our living room.

5 hyperventilating: breathing rapidly

"I'm sure Caleb's condition has left you with a great many medical expenses," reminded Prax. "This will pay those expenses with more than enough left over for you."

Well, Caleb might not talk, but money does, and Mr. Prax had himself a deal. As they came walking out of the kitchen, I tried to scoot up the stairs, into the shadows, where I couldn't be seen—but Prax saw me nonetheless. He stared at me with that strange smile again.

"Rhia," said Mr. Prax. "I would very much like you to come to my gallery and assist your brother in his creation."

I shrunk back even further.

"I don't do what he does," I told him.

"Of course not," said Prax. "But every artist needs an assistant."

"No," I told him. I wouldn't be bought, like my parents were.

My parents turned to me in shock, as if I had just thrown a stone through a plate glass window, then my mother turned back to Mr. Prax.

"Rhia will be happy to go," declared my mother. Then she turned to me. "After all, it's summer vacation, so she has plenty of time, don't you, Rhia?"

I didn't trust this Mr. Prax, no matter how much money he had. He wasn't just a rich guy who liked to help autistic kids—there was much more to him than that. Still, this was a battle I knew I couldn't win. Three adults and a million dollars against little ol' me. No matter how far I wanted to be away from Prax, I knew I was destined to spend days, maybe weeks, with the eerie man, watching Caleb paint.

"Fine," I said. "I'll go, but only because I want to make sure Caleb's treated right."

"Splendid," said Prax. "I'd like Caleb and Rhia at my gallery at nine o'clock sharp tomorrow morning."

After Mr. Prax had gone, I went back up to Caleb's room, where he sat on the edge of his bed, exactly where I'd left him.

I stretched him out and pulled the covers over him. He lay there looking up at the ceiling—a ceiling that was covered with his Crayola creations.

"Do you know you're worth a million dollars, Caleb," I said to him. He blinked, but showed no signs of hearing me. "Do you even know what a million dollars is?" Still no response. I don't know why I always expected him to say something.

"Good night, Caleb. I love you." I turned off the light, went to my room, and slipped into a sleep filled with nightmares I couldn't remember.



Caleb and I took a bus to Mr. Prax's gallery, but instead of bringing us inside, he took us for a ride in his white Mercedes limousine. The limousine, he told us, was a gift from one of the clients of his gallery. I wondered how anyone—even a rich person—could give away a limousine.

We drove for an hour, into the heart of the city, until we stopped at an immense museum of art. All afternoon we wandered through the maze of exhibits.

"See how Manet uses light to capture the moment of sunset here," Prax said at one point. "See how Van Gogh's thick textures bring the night sky to life," he said at another. "See how the tiny points of color in Seurat's work blend together the farther away you stand."<sup>6</sup> Gallery after gallery, he had something to say about every artist, every painting, until my mind was so full of color and texture that all I could see was gray.

"Why are you doing this?" I finally asked him. "Caleb doesn't care. He's not listening to you. He doesn't know a Monet from a Manet from a Schmanet. He's retarded." I hated the word, but I was angry. "He's worse than retarded. Don't you understand that?"

Then he looked at me with that same cold stare he gave my father the night before. "I'm not talking to him. I'm talking to *you*."

"Me?"

I looked at Caleb, whose eyes wandered around, giving as much time to the thermostat on the wall as they did to the paintings.

"Caleb needs no words to tell him about these paintings," said Mr. Prax.

"So why are you telling me about it?" I asked.

"So that maybe you'll be able to understand some of the things he already knows," was Prax's answer. Then he asked me something I'll never forget.

"Do you think that these artists were masters?"

"Sure," I said. "I guess."

Prax shook his head. "No. These artists could only bring a hint of greatness to their canvases. Shadows of possibilities, nothing more. They are failures." And then he leaned in close to me. "Would you like to see the work of real masters?"

6 Manet ... Van Gogh ... Seurat: European painters of the Impressionist period

And although I didn't want to go anywhere else with Mr. Prax today, curiosity had already begun to drill deep into my brain. I nodded my head and said, "Yes. Yes I do."

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He took us back to his gallery, where the walls were covered with canvases filled with dripping splotches of brown paint.

"You call these masterpieces?" I asked. "Looks like a lot of mud to me."

He shook his head. "This isn't the gallery. The real gallery is upstairs."

He opened a door and took us up a narrow staircase into a huge loft. It must have once been a factory or something, because it had brick walls, and lots of windows—but those windows were all painted over.

Surrounding us were dozens upon dozens of sheet-covered canvases, all five- or six-feet tall, and all resting upon heavy wooden easels. In the dim light of the huge loft, they looked like ghosts all facing in different directions.

He locked the door behind us.

"These are the works of the masters," he said and began to pull away the sheets that covered them one by one.

Any doubts I had were gone the moment I laid eyes on that first canvas.

It was a landscape like nothing I had ever seen, and trying to explain it now is like trying to explain sight to a blind person. These were colors the human eye had never before seen. Colors that had no names, depicting a place too strange and surreal to be of this world.

The second masterpiece was in a different set of hues, but just as incredible: A scene of clouds billowing upward toward a sun that actually shone, lighting up the room. Deep within the painting, golden winged beings seemed caught in a glorious journey toward that sun.

The third was the most magnificent of all. A forest of impossibly exotic trees, swirling in a greenish mist. Hills rolled into the distance, and in the foreground the single limb of a tree curved downward, with a smattering of red leaves. It seemed so real I could almost smell the rich fragrances of the forest and feel the slow breeze that made the mist swim and shimmer. It was unearthly, and otherworldly, like the other paintings.

"You wish to touch the painting," said Prax. It wasn't so much a question as a statement of fact. "You may do so. These paintings are meant to be touched."



I reached out toward one of those redder-than-red leaves to feel its velvet texture . . .

. . . and when I drew my hand away, I was holding the leaf between my fingers!

I gasped, and let the leaf flutter to the ground.

Prax smiled. "The task of the artists," he said, "is the creation of worlds. Very few succeed. Many die trying."

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In a small room behind the great gallery was a paint-splattered studio, and in that studio were a palette, brushes, and about a thousand brand-new tubes of paint. All set up in front of a canvas the same size as the others in the gallery. Only this canvas was empty.

Caleb stood just a few inches away from the canvas, staring that blank stare of his, and Mr. Prax put a paintbrush in Caleb's hand.

"Do you believe in miracles, Rhia?"

To be honest, I didn't know. But then my brother began to paint. Thick, heavy brush strokes. In moments Caleb had begun creating a bright, wonderful work of art.

Then I saw something out of the corner of my eye. There was something shiny in Prax's hand. Shiny and sharp. I gasped and pulled Caleb away from the canvas as Prax brought the carving knife down . . . slashing through the center of the canvas. The fabric shredded from top to bottom.

"No!" he screamed furiously at Caleb. "Look at those brush strokes! This is Van Gogh!" I was so shocked, all I could do was push myself back against the wall in disbelief.

Caleb screamed as if he himself had been stabbed and didn't stop screaming until Prax brought another canvas. He quieted immediately and silently resumed painting. He dabbed his brush against the canvas lightly, creating tiny little points of light. Again Prax's knife came down, shredding the emerging work.

"No!" Prax yelled. "This is Seurat."

Caleb wailed again and began to rock feverishly back and forth. Once more Prax brought a fresh canvas.

I wanted to grab Caleb and run, taking him away from this ranting, insane man—and yet part of me must have understood what he was doing, and why he was doing it. Because I stayed. I stayed to witness Caleb's terrifying ordeal.

"We're not leaving here," shouted Prax, "until we're done. Even if it takes days. Weeks. Months."

On and on it went. I began crying, begging Prax to stop, but he wouldn't. He shredded canvas after canvas—one that looked like a Manet, and another like a Picasso. Caleb barely had a chance to get down a single brush stroke before that awful knife would come down again, sending him into a screaming fit, each one worse than the one before.

And then Caleb just shut down.

Prax put a new canvas in front of him, and Caleb didn't move. He stood there, red in the face, staring at the white fabric with an expression of emptiness worse than ever before—as if he were staring through the canvas with no emotion. No mind. He didn't even try to paint.

"Now you've done it!" I shouted at Prax through my tears. "Now he'll never paint or pick up a crayon ever again! You've ruined the one thing he can do, you monster."

Prax didn't answer me; he just looked at Caleb, waiting. Then I heard the faraway jingling of bells, and Prax left to greet a customer who had just arrived downstairs. He closed the door behind him, and Caleb and I were alone with the horribly empty canvas.

"Caleb," I whispered. "Caleb, you don't have to paint. You don't have to do anything. We'll get you home. I'll tuck you in bed. It'll be just like it always was. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Nothing. Caleb didn't even rock back and forth. Something was very, very wrong, and I cursed Prax for doing this to him.

That's when I heard voices outside the door. I peeked through the keyhole to see Prax—his slick, smooth self leading a couple through the great secret gallery. The man and woman hardly looked rich enough to invest in great works of art. In fact, they looked poor, worn, and tired as if they'd seen more trouble and pain than most.

The man knelt down on the gallery floor, opened up a suitcase, and showed its contents to Prax.

"It's all there," said the man wearily. "Every penny we could find. Everything we own."

"I'm afraid it's not very much," the woman apologized.

Prax waved the remark away. I guess he didn't care how much it was. "Have you chosen a work that suits you?" he asked.

The man and woman stepped toward the surreal landscape with the red leaves.

"Ah," said Prax, smiling his multicolored smile for them. "My daughter's. I hope you enjoy it."

And with that I could see the look of world-weariness leave the couple's faces. How would they carry it out, I wondered—it was such a huge canvas.

I leaned back to brush some hair from my face, and when I peeked through the hole again, the couple was gone . . .

. . . and a single leaf, redder than red, fluttered to the floor at Prax's feet. My heart missed a very long beat.

Prax immediately covered the painting with a sheet, and turned.

"Come out, Rhia," he said, knowing I was there all along. "The door isn't locked."

I stepped into the gallery and helped Mr. Prax adjust the sheet on the painting so it hung just right.

Prax seemed to sigh in satisfaction, then closed the suitcase. I noticed it only seemed to have a few crumpled bills.

"This world we live in," said Prax, "is kind to some, but cruel to others. For those who would rather not be here, I provide . . . alternatives." Then he smiled at me, and although his smile still seemed filled with many strange colors, I felt I could understand some of them now. "Perhaps there will come a time," he said, "when everyone will have to choose a masterpiece."

The smell of oil paint seemed to grow stronger around me, and I turned to see that Caleb had begun painting. He was working feverishly—and this time it was different from before. As I stepped back into the studio, I could see the speed at which his fingers were moving. They were a blur. Even the colors he was putting on that canvas seemed far brighter, far more special than the colors that came from the tubes of paint.

All the time he stared through that white canvas as if the work was already there behind it and he wasn't so much brushing on paint as he was brushing away the emptiness. Soon he threw the paintbrush away and began to use his fingers, spreading and blending the colors from corner to corner. For half an hour we watched in awed silence, and half an hour was all it took.

"My God!" I said when it was done, but my words seemed far away, lost in the depth of the painting.

It was something entirely new, nothing like what any artist anywhere had ever created. The world Caleb had made was both wilderness and

city, both earth and sky. Wild winds swept through magnificent trees toward gleaming crystalline spires.<sup>7</sup> Brilliant shafts of light spilled upon peaceful hills, and yet the light was balanced by deep shafts of darkness that swam with unknowable mysteries. Still, as new as all this was, it was somehow familiar. It was then that I realized that everything in this great work I'd seen before. A fragment on the refrigerator door. A sketch on Caleb's wall. Everything Caleb had ever drawn was just a shadow of this, his great work. His one work.

I reached toward it, wanting more than anything to reach into it—and instead I got my fingers covered with paint.

Caleb smoothed over the smudge I had made with my fingers.

"It's not finished," said Mr. Prax. "It needs a signature."

"But Caleb can't write his name."

Mr. Prax shook his head. "That's not the kind of signature I mean." Then Prax leaned over and whispered into Caleb's ear. "Go on, Caleb. Finish it."

And with that, Caleb reached forward and pressed his spread fingers against the center of his creation. He grit his teeth. He squinted his eyes and pushed that hand against the canvas with all his soul, until finally his hand punched through . . . into a world rich with colors. I could see the canvas changing, the flatness of it stretching out and back like a wave was rolling through it, until its depth reached the infinite horizon.

Caleb looked at his fingers there inside of his painting, watching the light playing off of them . . . then he lurched forward and leapt into it. Once inside, he threw his hands out. He spun around. He was dancing—Caleb was actually dancing! And then for the first time in his life he turned his head to look at me. And he smiled. It was a smile filled with more colors than Mr. Prax's. That's when I knew Caleb was finally where he belonged. Caleb didn't waste time saying good-bye. He turned and ran, hopped and skipped deep into his world, until he disappeared in a place the canvas did not show.

My joy to have seen him so happy overwhelmed my grief at knowing he was gone. With my eyes full of tears, I reached my hand into that world too. I felt the warmth of that strange light. How I wanted to launch myself in there as well, but Mr. Prax had something else in mind.

"I need a gatekeeper," he told me. "Someone to decide whom Caleb would want in his world. Will you do that for me?"

<sup>7</sup> crystalline spires: glass steeples

I didn't answer him. Instead I went to a shelf, opened a sheet, and together we gently covered the canvas.

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That night we brought Mom and Dad to the gallery, to show them the masterpiece—and although my parents can be thick as a brick sometimes, one look at the painting and they understood. My mother cried tears of both joy and loss, as I had. My father hid his feelings by comforting her.

Since then, I've been taking my own art lessons. I still don't know much about art, but I do know that there are places inside of us—palaces of glorious light and caverns of unknowable darkness. Magical places filled with brilliant, unimaginable colors that we suffer to bring forth.

I know I could never suffer the way Caleb did—to imagine a place so perfectly that it becomes real—but if someday I can paint just a shadow of the possibilities . . . perhaps that will be enough. ∞

